

A Day on the Bay

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This story reveals a close call that occurred during a late-spring day in the Texas coastal estuary known as Christmas Bay.

If you're not familiar with estuary wade-fishing, it's hard to explain the allure of hunting fish on foot. I normally go after "The Big Three"—speckled sea trout, redfish and flounder. What makes this kind of fishing fun is that you never know what you're going to get—except that it will probably have teeth. The rare 3- to 4-foot-long shark will occasionally appear, but usually not until later in the season.

I'd planned ahead for my day on Christmas Bay. I'd assembled my fishing tackle, including my stringer—a long thin rope I'd run between the fishes' gills and mouth to keep them from escaping. I'd also checked the weather, and it was perfect for fishing. A strong early morning tide promised a successful catch.

I got to the bay at 4:30 a.m. It was a couple of hours before sunrise and I needed to hurry to catch the rising tide. The waters were still a bit chilly, so I donned my neoprene waders to help ward off the cold. As I gathered my equipment, I realized the quick-release clasp on my stringer was missing. No problem—I'd improvise by looping the stringer through my belt several times.

I looked at the familiar reference lights across the bay to help guide me as I entered the water. As I did, I began the "bay shuffle"—a technique to keep from stepping on stingrays and getting a tail barb in your leg or foot. I also wore stingray guards on my legs as an extra precaution.

I'd been fishing about three hours when the sun rose and beautifully silhouetted the coastline. My stringer contained several fish and it was time to walk back. I had chosen an indirect route so I'd have a fairly hard bottom for easy walking. I was about 300 yards from the shore and could see my truck in the distance. The high tide had entered the bay and the water was a little over waist deep.

As I was walking, the water behind me suddenly exploded. I turned around and saw the fish on my stringer struggling against something. I immediately grabbed the stringer and began pulling it toward me. BIG mistake! The largest speckled trout was nearly gone—completely bitten off behind the head. A quick check of the water around me revealed I wasn't alone. I counted one ... two ... three ... no—four shark fins circling me!

I struggled to remove the stringer from my belt as I headed for shallower water about 100 yards away. The sharks kept following me and circling as they attacked the fish on my stringer. With each succeeding attack, the tugs got stronger and more aggressive. The largest shark was around 4 feet long—a formidable-sized predator, especially when part of a group. He began testing me as prey, swimming within an arm's length. Using the handle of my fishing rod, I lunged toward him and struck a single blow just behind the gills. His sleek shape slapped the water in front of me as he knocked my hand to one side.

The water where I was headed was about 2 feet deep—shallow enough to protect me from the sharks. To get there, however, I had to swim across a much deeper small-boat channel marked off by metal pipes. Were I to have a chance, I had to get rid of the day's catch.



Keeping an eye on my pursuers as best I could, I finally freed myself of the stringer. The sharks closed in and blood surrounded a group of fish that would never make it to my table.

I began swimming across the channel. For the first time I noticed my heart pounding in my chest and the adrenaline in my system. Each stroke brought me closer to safety as the sharks—occupied by their fish-on-a-rope dinner—fell farther behind.

When I got back to the shore and my truck, I inventoried my equipment. Although I'd managed to save my fishing rod, I'd donated several fish, a stringer line, a box of tackle and my lucky fishing hat to the sharks. However, I still had the most important thing—my life—and took away some important lessons learned. I'll share those with you:

- Complacency can injure or kill you by blinding you to hazards. Not realizing how adaptable various species can be, I didn't expect to see any sharks that day. I'd overlooked the first two steps of Composite Risk Management—identifying and assessing the hazards.
- Use the buddy system during off-duty activities. I'd fished alone in this spot on countless occasions. However, it only took getting into trouble once for me to appreciate the value of having someone else to cover my back.
- Check your equipment to ensure you have everything you need and that it's functioning properly. Don't ignore the small stuff because you think it's unimportant. My stringer's missing quick-release clasp became very important when those sharks began using my fish as appetizers while working their way up to the main course—me.
- Contingency planning can help you survive unexpected, dangerous situations. The key, however, is planning before getting into trouble. This is step three of CRM, developing controls and making decisions. The alternative is trying to come up with a plan after trouble starts. This is typically called "panic."

Finally, don't ever quit what you love doing during your free time. Instead, assess the risks before and during your activities and, afterward, think about how well you planned for them. Chances are you've already survived many dangerous situations just executing your combat missions. Why let complacency or indiscipline make you the victim of an avoidable off-duty accident? It goes without saying you have a responsibility to your unit, family and friends to not let that happen.

Enjoy doing the things you love this summer by doing them safely. And if you want to try out wade-fishing, I'll be looking for you on the bay!

-- Editors note: The author's name was withheld by request. If you would like to publish a story anonymously in Knowledge, please contact the editor by email at knowledge@crc.army.mil.